

Valediction

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Summary: A day after losing the Battle of the Ice Cave, Hiccup faces a difficult decision.

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They laid out the wounded in the Great Hall. The tables were pushed aside to make the room into a triage center. The Vikings that had only minor injuries worked to doctor those who had suffered axe or sword or burn wounds. Gobber was temporarily placed in charge of the tribe until the crisis ended and Hiccup could take his place as chief. Hiccup in the mean time worked alongside the other Vikings, bandaging gashes and setting broken bones. He worked without stopping for several hours, until Gobber put a hand on the boy's shoulder and told him to take a break.

Hiccup walked over to one of the tables sitting in the shadows at the back of the Hall. He sat on the bench and placed his head in his hands.

"This is all my fault," he said into his hands. No one heard him over the sounds of Vikings moving about in the Hall.

The battle the Vikings had fought had been made at his suggestion. If he had not convinced Stoick to send the warriors to fight Drago's army at the iceberg in order to recover the Dragon Jewel, the village of Berk would still be whole. They would not have lost a battle they never should have fought. It was the worst massacre of the Vikings of Berk in over two hundred years, even worse than the Battle of the Green Death that had ended the war with the dragons five years earlier.

_Brilliant idea, Hiccup, _he thought._ Why not send a group of Vikings to fight on an iceberg a day's sailing away against an army at least six times their size? Of course. That makes complete sense. Because it went so well the last time we sent an army to fight an

enemy we didn't really know._

The battle played out in Hiccup's mind. The Vikings had sailed to the iceberg to meet Drago's army and stop them from leaving. Hiccup had flown back from Berk with Toothless after meeting with his father. The rest of the riders were waiting for him with his mother.

"I can recover the jewel," she had said to him. "But I need a distraction. Drago's army will be arriving soon. What can we do to stop them?"

It was Hiccup who had thought to try to convince his father to send the Vikings of Berk. The Vikings were strong fighters. They had fought dragons for three hundred years without giving up and leaving the island. Hiccup told his mother that he would convince Stoick to bring the army to the iceberg.

Once back at Berk, Hiccup explained the importance of Valka's mission to his father, and Stoick agreed to send the warriors to fight. What Hiccup didn't tell his father was that Valka was alive. She had asked Hiccup to allow her the chance to explain her absence, since she knew Stoick wouldn't take it as well as Hiccup did. After the battle, she would tell him. Until then, she would just be the Dragon Rider to everyone else.

The Vikings of Berk arrived in time to stop Drago's army from leaving. Most of the warriors fought on foot. Hiccup led the aerial attack, directing the warriors on dragon-back with his Dragonblade, a metal rod bent in the shape of a sword. It was covered with a mixture of Monstrous Nightmare saliva and tar to keep a bright flame glowing for most of the battle.

The Vikings were horribly outnumbered. Drago's men, comprised of Outcasts and criminals, vastly outnumbered the Viking warriors. Even with the several dozen dragons fighting alongside the Vikings, it was hardly a fight at all. The Vikings were cut down in masses. There was no way they could hold off Drago's army for enough time for Valka to find the Dragon Jewel before Drago's men.

They might have stood a chance if Stoick had not been one of the first Vikings killed in the battle. Everything fell apart once Stoick was dead. The scene would be forever engraved in Hiccup's memory. He had been flying with Toothless above the battle, directing the other riders to fight where the Vikings needed the most help. Drago's men were firing catapults into the middle of the battlefield, not caring whether or not they hit their own warriors or not. It only mattered that the Vikings of Berk were killed.

Stoick was part of a group of Vikings trying to take down one of these catapults. Hiccup had been trying to destroy the catapults that the Vikings weren't attacking. He didn't dare try to have a rider and dragon hit one while there were Vikings nearby. Stoick plowed a line through the crowd until he reached the catapult. He and several other Vikings swarmed the men working it. He-

"Hiccup."

Hiccup was shaken out of his recollection of the battle by Astrid's voice. He looked up at her. Astrid's face had streaks of blood and dirt on one side and the end of her braid was singed. Her right arm

was in a sling from when she was knocked off Stormfly in the middle of the battle and broken it. The only sign of emotion was from the way her lips were pressed in a thin line together. Hiccup knew her well enough, though, to realize how upset she was. Astrid hid her tears well.

Hiccup met Astrid's eyes. They were full of exhaustion and grief. They matched his own.

"Stormfly's gone," she said. "I was trying to bandage the wound on her leg. And then she just, got up andâ€¦and flew away."

Astrid stopped and swallowed, blinking back tears. She took a deep breath before looking around to see if anyone was listening to what she had to say. Hiccup stayed silent, waiting for her to continue. She leaned closer to him and spoke softly.

"It's not just Stormfly, either. Other dragons are leaving. They're just randomly flying out of the stables and have been for the last half hour. People are starting to notice."

Hiccup put his head back in his hands and thought about the end of the battle. After Stoick was killed, the Vikings of Berk quickly started to lose. Hiccup had hoped that somehow he and Toothless could end the battle. There was nothing they could do.

Everything turned worse once Valka was captured. Hiccup had watched desperately as Drago brought his sword down on her neck. Watching both of his parents die in a matter of minutes was the last straw.

Hiccup had landed in front of Drago's command center with Toothless. He took off his helmet and announced the surrender of the Vikings of Berk, ending the slaughter of his people. But, as a condition of his surrender, Hiccup had asked that Drago wait to use the Dragon Jewel to make the dragons leave. It was to give him a chance to get the wounded back to Berk, he explained. Drago seemed surprised that Hiccup knew what he was planning with the Dragon Jewel, but, even more surprising to Hiccup, he agreed. Hiccup and the others were given a day to bring the wounded home. It was a small mercy.

That day was now up. For the past several hours, ideas had passed in and out of Hiccup's head about what he could do. There was only one solution he had come up with that he was willing to execute. He didn't like it, and he knew the other Vikings would like it even less. But it was the only way to save as many members of Berk as possible.

"Hiccup," Astrid said. "You have to do something. The dragons can't just _leave. _You have to stop this!"

He said nothing.

"Hiccup?" she asked again, wanting his answer. "What are you going to do?"

The boy rubbed at his temples and sighed. "I'm going to let the dragons go."

"Hiccup, you can't- !"

"What am I supposed to do, Astrid?" he said, throwing his hands in the air. "You saw the effects of the Dragon Jewel. If they dragons don't obey its orders, they die. What can I do to stop that?"

"The dragons are our friends, Hiccup! You're just going to let them leave?"

"What else can I do? Lock them up? I can't just lock the dragons up and force them to their deaths!"

"There must be something you can do. Not just nothing!"

"Astrid," Hiccup said, his voice sharp. "My father is dead. I am your chief now. You may not agree with my decision, but what I have to say is final."

He stood up. "I am going to let the dragons leave Berk, Astrid. I would rather all of them, even Stormfly, even Toothless, be gone than have to know that I kept them here to die. I don't think Drago wants the dragons dead. Just gone. Maybe someday we can bring them back.

"For now, though," Hiccup said, "I want you and Gobber to tell everyone to meet in the plaza in front of the Great Hall in an hour. Get everyone who can walk or be carried there. I'll tell them what's going on. Why the dragons are leaving. They're expecting me to say something soon anyway." He started to walk towards the doors to the outside. Astrid was shocked at Hiccup's sudden outburst and claim to authority but shook her head to clear it and ran to catch up with him.

"What are you going to do?" she asked when they were out in front of the Hall. It was a beautiful day outside. Clouds were scattered across the sky. On any other day, Hiccup would be out flying with Toothless. He wished that didn't have to change.

He didn't look at Astrid as he answered. "Toothless can't fly on his own. I need to fix that. I won't have Toothless dying here because he can't fly away."

Hiccup started to go, but stopped and turned back towards her. Astrid might not agree with his decision and would be upset with him, but he knew that after she had some time to think it over, she would go with what he said. And, if not, it would be too late to change the outcome anyway.

"Astrid," he began, "I don't like this any more than you do. But I don't want the dragons to die either. We'll get through this. Somehow.

"Now please," Hiccup looked Astrid in the eyes. "Go gather everyone. Tell them I'll be back to explain everything. Don't tell them. Leave that to me. You and Gobber are in charge until then."

His eyes lingered on hers for a second until she nodded. Hiccup took a breath and nodded back, before turning to walk away.

Hiccup walked quickly down the steps, his gaze averted from the row of bodies lain out on the grass, covered with blankets. The time it

took to return to Berk was too long, and despite the medics' best attempts, over a dozen Vikings hadn't survived the trip back. They were the lucky ones. The bodies of those who died at the iceberg remained on the battlefield. Hiccup and the others had left so quickly that there hadn't been time to collect the bodies or build a funeral pyre for them.

He'd have to send someone back to take care of the fallen warriors. He and Astrid would go, of course. The new chief and his future wife would certainly have to be responsible for gathering the bodies and building the pyre. They couldn't spare enough ships to burn at sea since most were barely sea-worthy, so a pyre would have to do. Who else could he send? He and Astrid couldn't take care of everything by themselves. Gobber would have to stay in Berk to run the village. The quickest way there and back would be on dragon-back, so riders would have to-

The thought stopped Hiccup in his tracks. There would be no more dragons to ride after today. Hiccup blinked back tears and tried not to think about it. There would be time for that later.

He made his way across the plaza towards his workshop at the forge. The square was empty, the Vikings in their houses resting after the battle and mourning their dead in private. Hiccup was glad for it. He didn't think he could face having to answer any questions right now.

Hiccup opened the window at the forge to let some light in and picked his way through Gobber's cluttered workspace to the back. The coals of the forge were barely burning, kept hot only so Gobber or Hiccup wouldn't have to relight the entire thing from scratch.

Hiccup reached his workspace and moved some half-finished projects aside to pull out a trunk from under a table. He opened it and took out something he hadn't seen in nearly five years. He set it on the table in front of him and sighed. Hiccup had hoped that he or anyone else would never need to use this.

It was the tail Hiccup had made for Toothless during that first Snoggletog after the dragons had come to live on Berk. Toothless had shaken it off and flung it away after he'd returned from his mission to reclaim Hiccup's helmet from the sea, letting Hiccup know he would rather fly with Hiccup than fly alone. Later that day, Hiccup had found the tail mostly intact. He'd spent the next day fixing it before putting it away.

Living as a Viking and flying on dragon-back was a dangerous business. Hiccup knew that as well as anybody. He wore a prosthetic leg as a constant reminder. It was a morbid thought, but Hiccup knew that there was a chance " a high chance, if he was honest " that he would die before Toothless did. Toothless' current tail did have a way for him to fly on his own, but it was bulky and didn't work as well as this tail did. Neither would be as effective as the two of them working together, but Hiccup didn't want Toothless to be grounded if something were to happen to him, so he had repaired this tail and put it away. Only Astrid and Gobber knew about it. Both of them had instructions to help fix it onto Toothless' if it was needed. Hiccup had also left a letter in his room and his workshop if for some reason neither of them could help Toothless.

Hiccup had always thought that it would be one of those two who would have to use this tail, if it were ever used. He never expected he would be the one who would have to give it back to his best friend.

He stared down at the tail in the dim light of the workshop. Hiccup didn't want to give the tail to Toothless. The dragon probably wouldn't even let him put it on. He sighed again, then reached down and picked the tail up in his arms. The yells of the dragons that had refused to obey Drago's command with the Dragon Jewel were still too fresh in his mind. Those who disobeyed died a painful death. Hiccup wouldn't let that happen to Toothless.

Hiccup left the forge and crossed the plaza again to walk to his house. Toothless would be waiting there, hopefully. Hiccup had left the dragon there to rest after returning to Berk. It had been a hard day of dodging harpoons and nets that Drago's men had aimed into the air. The duo had managed to avoid all of them, but the Night Fury was especially exhausted.

He opened the door to his house and stopped. Reminders of Stoick were everywhere. Weaponry, shields, clothes—all of Stoick's possessions were in this house. Hiccup didn't want to think about what it would mean now that his father was gone. They'd never exactly seen eye-to-eye, but in the past few years, things had been better. He pushed those thoughts aside to focus on what he needed to do now. There would be time for grief later.

"Toothless," Hiccup called out. "Are you up there?"

To Hiccup's relief, he heard the familiar shifting of Toothless on his rock slab upstairs. He ran to the stairs and climbed up to his room.

As soon as he made it upstairs, Hiccup was assaulted by an excited Toothless. The dragon nudged Hiccup, knocking the tail out of the boy's hands so that it clattered to the floor. Hiccup knelt down so that he could better embrace Toothless.

"Hey, bud," Hiccup said, a weary smile brought to his face by Toothless's greeting. "Glad to see you're doing okay."

Hiccup could tell, though, that Toothless was subdued. Like Hiccup, Toothless had been physically unharmed in the battle, but the boy could tell that Toothless was mourning the deaths of the Vikings and dragons as much as any of the surviving warriors were. He could see it in Toothless's eyes. The dragon had seen Stoick and Valka and the others die right in front of him, as Hiccup had. He would miss them as much as Hiccup would.

Although Hiccup was worried for his friend, he was more worried by the fact that he could see the plates around Toothless' face quiver slightly. He hadn't seen that since the night five years ago when Toothless had taken him and Astrid to see the dragon's nest. The dragon's eyes kept darting to the cutout in the ceiling that he used to enter the house. His pupils were narrower than Hiccup found comfortable, although that could have been because Toothless was stressed, not because he might be compelled to leave at any moment. It scared Hiccup, though, because that meant that Toothless was sensing the pull of the Dragon Jewel.

Some small part of Hiccup had hoped that Toothless would be immune to the Dragon Jewel much like he had been to the control of the Green Death. But there was still so much Hiccup didn't know about his best friend, even after five years.

It was too short of a time together. But, Hiccup had to do what he needed to, whether he liked it or not. He looked away from Toothless and sighed, dropping his hands to his side and letting his shoulders droop. His gaze slid over to the tail on the floor near the top of the stairs. Toothless lay down on the floor in front of Hiccup so that the two of them were at eye level with each other. Hiccup reached up a hand to touch Toothless on the head and sighed again.

"You can feel it, can't you, Toothless?" he asked, not looking at the dragon. "The Dragon Jewel is trying to get you to leave Berk. And you're going to have to leave, or else you'll die."

Hiccup stood up. He walked over to the tail on the floor and brought it back to Toothless. He didn't kneel back down. Toothless sat up and sniffed the tail before looking at Hiccup expectantly, a question in his eyes.

Hiccup smiled sadly. "Yeah, bud, this is that tail. I've kept it for you, just in case—in case something happened to me. I think you deserve to be able to fly without me if I'm not there. I just...never thought that I would be the one to give it to you to use.

"I figured you'd need it today. You were there when he tested the Dragon Jewel and when I asked him to wait to use it so we could get home. And um—the other dragons are starting to leave, Toothless," Hiccup swallowed. "And I guess that means you're going to have to leave as well, bud."

Toothless didn't make any noise in response, but Hiccup could see the look in the dragon's eyes that all but confirmed his worst fears. He sighed. "I brought this for you. I figured you'd need it."

He walked around towards Toothless' tail. The dragon turned his head to follow Hiccup's movements, but didn't try to stop him. He knew what Hiccup needed to do. It worried Hiccup even more that Toothless didn't try to stop him like he did before. Hiccup had spent enough time with Toothless to know that the dragon understood what he was saying and what was going on. Toothless' reaction meant that the dragon would have to leave under the command of the Dragon Jewel.

Hiccup had removed all of Toothless' riding gear when the two of them had come to the house after returning to Berk. It was now carefully stacked in the corner along with Hiccup's armor. It pained Hiccup that he wouldn't need it again after tonight.

Toothless watched silently as Hiccup attached the autonomous tail. When Hiccup finished, the dragon flexed his tail, and the mechanical part worked just as well as it had five years earlier. If it had been any other day, Hiccup would have been proud of craftsmanship of his fourteen year-old self. But not today.

Hiccup turned to look at the dragon and tried not to cry. "There,

bud," he said, trying and failing to smile, "Now you can fly on your own if you need to leave."

Toothless let out a mournful keen. Hiccup walked over and put his arm around the dragon. "I wish I could go with you and the other dragons. I justâ€¦with my father gone, I'm the chief of the tribe now. I have a duty to the other Vikings andâ€¦I can't abandon them."

He hoped Toothless would understand why he wasn't doing more to stop this and why he was letting the dragon go on his own. It tore him up inside to choose his responsibility to the tribe over his best friend. But whether or not Hiccup wanted it this way, he was the chief now and the only one in a position to make the choice that would cause the least amount of damage for everyone in the tribe, dragons included.

Hiccup wrapped both arms around Toothless' head and hugged him tightly. Toothless, in his own way, hugged the boy back.

"I'm going to miss you, Toothless," Hiccup said, his voice cracking on the dragon's name. "It won't be the same on Berk without you."

The two of them stood there in silence for a moment, relishing their last chance to be together.

After a few minutes, Hiccup broke them apart and said, "I have to go, Toothless. I told Astrid to gather everyone so that I can tell them why all of you are leaving. You're welcome to come if you want, until you have to go. You can watch me speak in front of everyone." He cracked a small smile. "We'll see how that goes."

He walked over to the pile of his armor and pulled out the Dragonblade. He double checked to make sure that it had enough fuel to keep the fire burning for a while before strapping the sheath onto the belt around his waist. He walked for the stairs, but stopped at the top and looked back at Toothless. The dragon kept flexing his new tail, though his gaze was fixed intently on Hiccup. Hiccup looked at his friend and sighed. He wasn't going to say goodbye, not yet.

Everyone was gathered on the plaza in front of the Great Hall when Hiccup arrived. Astrid stood with Gobber on the mound of grass above the stonework, looking out at the crowd. Astrid had wiped some of the blood and dirt off her face and changed into clean clothes. She greeted Hiccup with a tight smile. Somewhere under the stress he was feeling, Hiccup was relieved. Astrid wasn't upset with him anymore about his decision to just let the dragons leave without a fight.

Gobber had no prosthetic on his left arm. The metal part where he would hook up different appendages was dented, having been hit violently with an axe during the battle.

Hiccup walked up to them on the mound and looked at the assembled Vikings. Hardly anyone was without injury; many wore bloodied bandages covering sword wounds or burns. Toothless had followed Hiccup part of the way, but turned and gone a different path. Hiccup didn't know why or where the dragon was going, but he needed to make his way to the villagers and explain everything. It was unusual that

they would meet on the plaza, instead of inside the Great Hall, but Hiccup figured no one would want to meet in there after today. The crowd looked too small and was unusually quiet. It was missing too many people.

Hiccup's eyes automatically looked for the people he cared most about, although he knew he wouldn't find them in the group. Stoick's absence was most noticeable; it was hard to miss the imposing Viking and his large presence. Hiccup could still see his father swarmed by Drago's men. It had been Stoick against at least a dozen men, and the former Chief had held his own. It took only a single sword strike to make it through and down the enormous Viking, but not before he managed to take out every enemy around him. But beyond Stoick, Hiccup found other friends missing as well.

Fishlegs was standing at the front of the crowd. Both he and Meatlug had survived the battle, though not uninjured. Meatlug had been slashed by a sword on her rear leg, and Fishlegs had burns on his left side. But Fishlegs was the only one that Hiccup saw.

Snotlout had been one of the first to die. Despite the armor he wore and the speed and height at which he and Hookfang flew, a lucky arrow from Drago's archers had made it through to hit him in the chest. Astrid had watched it happen. The boy had fallen off his dragon from at least fifteen meters in the air. Hookfang had flown after Snotlout, landing near his body and setting fire to everything around it. No one dared approach the flaming dragon. Hiccup hadn't had time after the battle to bring Hookfang back to Berk. As far as he knew, the dragon was still on the iceberg. That, or he had been killed by Drago's men. He hoped that Hookfang had been left unharmed, but there was no way to know.

Missing from the crowd as well were Ruffnut and Tuffnut. Hiccup didn't know how Tuffnut had been killed, but he had seen a riderless Belch with Ruffnut still on Barf. Ruffnut had flown into a rage at her brother's death and the dragons had followed suit. The battlefield had been filled with explosions caused by the two dragons and their one rider, until they were eventually overwhelmed and brought down. Barf and Belch had been two of the few dragon casualties of the day.

The Vikings saw Hiccup standing on the mound and grew silent. Hiccup stared out at the crowd, his mouth poised to start speaking but no words coming out. Gods, how did Stoick ever do this? Hiccup didn't even know where to begin.

He felt Astrid move to stand next to him in a motion of solidarity. Her presence gave him the confidence to start talking. Hiccup took a deep breath.

"Vikings of Berk," he said, "Just hear me out, please, before you say anything. I need to explain something.

"Yesterday, we lost the biggest battle this tribe has fought in over two hundred years. We all lost people we cared about. And," he paused before continuing, "I'm about to tell you that we're going to lose even more. So I figure that you all deserve an explanation for what's happening right now."

The Vikings shuffled in the crowd, but let Hiccup speak.

"Most of you will remember my mother, Valka, before she left Berk. My father and I never knew what happened to her, whether she died or left on her own.

"A few days ago, a rider on an unfamiliar dragon followed me and Toothless while we were investigating a burnt forest several islands away from here. This rider spoke to us and told me that she is my mother."

There were mutterings among the Vikings as they heard the news that the chief's wife hadn't died twelve years ago like many of them believed. Hiccup waited a few seconds before continuing to speak. It had been hard enough for him to digest this piece of information.

"I believe that she was telling me the truth," he said. "I believe that this dragon rider was my mother, Valka. And I believe what else she told me, too."

He paused, not wanting to say out loud the other detail she had shared with him. But he had to explain.

"She said that the reason she left Berk in the first place was because of a legend she had read in an old book she got from Trader Johann. It was a book of rumors and stories — obscure ones, not the stories we've all heard before. These were new. And one of the stories she read told about something called the Dragon Jewel."

Hiccup stopped and looked at the audience, unsure of how they would react to what he had to say next. The Vikings all stared back at him expectantly, and so Hiccup took a deep breath and forged on.

"The book said that no one knew where the Dragon Jewel was made from or how it was created, but that it came with the arrival of the dragons over five centuries ago. A shepherd found it one day after his village was destroyed by a volcano. It was sitting in near the top of the volcano, a red stone about the size of a bird's egg.

"As soon as the shepherd picked it up, a group of small, black dragons attack him, pecking at his hands and trying to get the stone out of them. The shepherd yelled at the dragons to stop, and to his surprise, they did. He tried giving the dragons another command, telling them to stop flying and land. They did. He told them to do other things, like attack each other or do a trick in the air. The dragons did all of those things, just like he told them to. The shepherd realized that the stone he had found had the power to control the dragons."

At this statement, the Vikings started to talk to each other, wondering, how was it possible that something existed that could control the dragons? Hiccup raised his voice to be heard over the crowd, continuing on now that his story had gained momentum.

"This is what my mother was searching for," Hiccup said. The Vikings quieted down, waiting for the rest of the tale. "She felt that the story about the Dragon Jewel was true, and she read that the shepherd was afraid that someone would use the Jewel to start a war between the tribes, fought by dragons. He hid the Jewel in a box and took it far away from the Archipelago. The book didn't say where he had

hidden it, but my mother told me that she believed she could find it. She left Berk to find it in hopes that she could use it to end the raids on our village. She said that she didn't tell anyone what she was doing because she didn't want the story to get out and someone use it to start a war like the shepherd thought might happen."

_Or use it to kill all the dragons, _Hiccup thought. Valka had told him that she never agreed with killing dragons for sport; they should only be killed in self defense. She had wanted the Jewel for herself to make sure that none of the other Vikings could use it and destroy all the dragons. Hiccup didn't know whether or not to believe her. He knew that she had been popular among the tribe and respected as much as Stoick had been. Then again, Hiccup himself had kept his friendship with Toothless a secret. It didn't seem so extreme that his mother could have secretly hated the thought of killing a dragon. Hiccup had decided to trust both his mother and his instincts, which told him that she had never wanted to kill the dragons unless absolutely necessary. Besides, it didn't make any sense that a woman who lived among the dragons would want to hurt any of them. But it didn't matter now. Drago had the Jewel and Valka was dead.

"She spent the next twelve years searching for it. She didn't tell me much about her time spent searching for the Jewel, but while she was looking, she started to learn more about the dragons and befriended one of them. She named him Cloudjumper."

Hiccup had met the imposing dragon with four wings and owl-like face. Valka had been flying with him when she had intercepted Hiccup and Toothless on their patrol. Hiccup didn't mention to the Vikings that Valka had taken them back to her hideout in the rock columns in a place close to where Hiccup and Toothless had landed after their first successful flight together. There, he and Toothless had met dozens of dragons that Valka had been rescuing from traps set by Drago and other trappers. Valka had shown an incredible amount of knowledge about the dragons, much more than Hiccup knew. He sensed that many of the Vikings were unsure of how to react to the news that Valka had been alive and living with dragons for the past decade. He didn't want to unsettle them even more than he knew they would be after he finished explaining.

"With Cloudjumper, my mother searched out more information on the Dragon Jewel and learned that the shepherd had supposedly hidden it in an ice cave a long way from where any Vikings lived," Hiccup said. "She planned on retrieving it and returning to Berk to stop our war with the dragons. But a year before we ended the war, she learned that someone else was looking for the Dragon Jewel, too. That person was Drago Bludvist. My mother decided to make it her mission to find the Jewel before him, since she learned that he was planning on doing something terrible with it."

Hiccup stopped and swallowed, his throat dry both from speaking so long and from the trepidation that filled him, knowing what the end of this story was going to be and dreading having to say it out loud to the Vikings. He looked out again at the Vikings, who stared back at him. It was obvious that some of them had already figured out most of what he was going to say next. But there were some, he knew, that were waiting for him to finish explaining why this tragedy had hit the village of Berk.

As he was looking at the assembled Vikings, Hiccup realized with a

start that Toothless was watching from the shadows at the back of the crowd. Even from across the plaza, Hiccup could see the anxiety on the dragon's face as he tried to resist the order of the Dragon Jewel. Hiccup almost gave up then, confronted with the painful truth that his best friend would be forced to leave Berk and Hiccup behind. How he wished he could leave all of this behind and join Toothless in the exodus from Berk!

But there are hard choices that must be made, and someone has to make them. It fell to Hiccup, chief of the tribe and trainer of dragons, to decide the future of the Vikings and dragons of Berk.

"Hiccup!" someone in the crowd shouted. "What happened next?"

Hiccup's focus on Toothless was broken and he tried to recollect his now scattered thoughts. But all the stress and grief and loss of the past few days caught up to Hiccup for a moment and he found himself blurting out, "The dragons are being forced to leave Berk."

Immediately, before Hiccup had even realized what he had said, the Vikings broke out in confused protest, calling out in bursts of "What?" and "You can't be serious!" The comments grew quickly from confusion to anger as the Vikings put together the unusual behavior of the dragons that had flown away from the village.

"Dragoâ€¦the Jewelâ€¦he's using itâ€¦that's why we were thereâ€¦," Hiccup tried to say, but stopped because he knew he had lost control of the crowd. He turned to look desperately at Astrid, who was furiously trying to get the crowd to settle down and finish listening to Hiccup. She was having as little success as Hiccup had had.

Both of them jumped when Gobber came to Hiccup's rescue. "Quiet down, the lot of you!" the Viking shouted. His voice carried over the roar of the crowd in a way that Hiccup's and Astrid's never could. "Let the boy finish what he has to say!"

In a few seconds, the Vikings were quiet. Gobber stepped back and gestured to Hiccup. "All yours, Hiccup," he said.

Hiccup felt a pang of affection for his old teacher. He hadn't told Gobber anything about what was happening, so the news of the dragons leaving was entirely new to him. Yet, Gobber was standing by Hiccup and would let him speak.

"The dragons are being forced to leave Berk," he repeated. "Drago is making them leave. He's using the Dragon Jewel on them. That's why we went to fight at the iceberg. My mother found out that Drago had discovered the location of the Dragon Jewel hidden in the ice cave. She decided to find me and show herself after all these years and was hoping I would help her.

"The other riders and I went with her to find the ice cave the jewel was supposedly hidden in. We had hoped to stop Drago there. But we discovered that he had brought his entire army with him, and there was no way that seven humans and dragons could stop them.

"We decided I would convince my father to send our army to fight him as a distraction to stop Drago from finding the Jewel and leaving

with it. And so I did. And, we fought, and we lost."

And it's all my fault. Hiccup didn't say those words out loud, but he knew that most everyone in the crowd was thinking it. It had been his idea to send the Vikings to what was now obviously a death sentence. For a moment, the guilt and shame threatened to overwhelm him, and Hiccup felt like he had five years earlier, when he was going to run away with Toothless instead of facing the dragon in the ring and his father outside of it. Hiccup would have left, just like his mother did, if Astrid hadn't interrupted them.

Hiccup was no longer that boy, however. He was not the coward he was then. It was time for him to accept that his decision had caused dozens of his friends and family and would cause the exodus of Berk's dragons. There are consequences to every action, and, hard as it may be, Hiccup would have to face them.

He didn't look at the Vikings as he spoke. "We lost," Hiccup repeated, his voice quiet. "We lost, and I'm sorry, because this is my fault. I'm going to do my best to fix as much as I can. I know I can't fix everything. I can't bring back the people we lost, and I can't make the dragons come back.

"I'll try to bring them back someday, once we're through this," he promised. "I can't now because taking care of this tribe is important and I have to let the dragons go and hope that they will be okay."

Hiccup stood up straighter and took another deep breath. "For now, I want your help to say goodbye to the dragons," he said, pointing west. There, he and the other Vikings could see dragons flying off towards the sun, towards wherever Drago was ordering them. Hiccup said a silent prayer to the gods that none of the Vikings had noticed the stream of dragons, or at least hadn't mentioned it.

"The dragons have been members of this tribe as much as the Vikings since they joined us five years ago," he said, feeling tears at the corner of his eyes. He unsheathed the Dragonblade and held it at his side and spoke to the crowd. "Vikings of Berk, will you join me in a tribute to the dragons as they leave?"

Without waiting for a response, Hiccup turned to the side and raised the Dragonblade into the air, lighting it on fire as he did. At the same moment, as if directed by the Blade, Toothless took off into the air, startling the crowd as he flew overhead. Hiccup kept the blade held in the air as he watched his best friend fly away without him. The dragon's flight path was erratic.

Toothless flew towards the setting sun. As he flew away, Hiccup heard Toothless's cry, the very same one that had once struck fear into the hearts of all the dragons. Hiccup watched Toothless look back towards the Viking boy standing on the grass in the heart of Berk. For a second, he thought the dragon would turn around and return. But Toothless flew on. No other dragons followed him. Toothless was the last dragon to leave Berk.

Behind him, the Vikings collected themselves and watched the Night Fury fly away. Hiccup worried that he looked foolish, standing to the wide with his flaming sword held high in the air. Then, he heard the distinctive sound of a blade being drawn, then more and more. He

glanced to his side at the Vikings. The ones that had carried their swords or axes or hammers with them raised the weapons in the air with Hiccup. Others took their helmets off and held them at their sides.

As one, the Vikings of Berk stood and watched the trail of dragons fly away from the island. They watched the dragons they once called enemies but now called friends leave them behind. In that moment, not a single one of them held any ill will towards Hiccup, for they would have likely done the same thing in his shoes. They only felt the sorrow of losing someone very dear to them.

Hiccup followed Toothless with his eyes as the dragon flew off towards the horizon. Hiccup didn't know where the dragons would go or what Drago would do with them, ultimately, once they had left. He didn't know what would happen to Berk once this night had passed. But right then, Hiccup promised to himself one thing.

_I will find you, Toothless, _he thought. _I will find you and the other dragons, and I will bring you back to Berk. _Bring them back to him.

Hiccup squeezed his eyes shut and a tear rolled down his face. He gritted his teeth and tried to hold back a sob. It was too late to bring back Stoick and Valka and Snotlout and the Twins and all the other Vikings and dragons that had been lost the day before. But he would bring those dragons back, or die trying.

For now, there was only one thing he could do. Hiccup opened his eyes and blinked away the tears he could and focused on Toothless in the distance. He was a small dot in the light of the sun that was almost set.

"Goodbye, Toothless," Hiccup whispered. The dragon disappeared as the last rays of sunlight faded from the sky. The Vikings of Berk were left with only the light from Hiccup's upraised Dragonblade, until its light too went out. Hiccup lowered the blade, but stood for a long time on the hill top, staring in the darkness at the last place he had seen his best friend.

End
file.